

MENTAL HEALTH AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING AMONG NATIONAL GUARD SOLDIERS

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Overview

- I. Background: Readiness and Resilience in National Guard Soldiers (RINGS) Project
- II. Conceptual Model: Soldier Resilience and Family Functioning
- III. Findings from 3 RINGS studies on PTSD and family functioning
- IV. Implications and future directions

The RINGS Project

- ▣ OEF/OIF have increasingly relied on large deployments of National Guard troops
- ▣ National Guard troops and their families face unique stressors, but remain understudied.
- ▣ RINGS Project aims to identify protective and vulnerability factors (risk and resilience) for soldier mental health in National Guard troops following combat deployments.
- ▣ Studies described today:
 - RINGS Longitudinal Cohort Study
 - In-theater Screening and Follow-up Study
 - Couples and PTSD Study

RINGS Longitudinal Cohort Study

▣ Aims:

- Identify psychosocial risk and resilience factors associated with post-deployment mental health, health care utilization, and military attrition
- *Examine rates of relationship distress and investigate associations between PTSD and intimate partner relationship functioning.*

▣ Method:

- Design: Prospective, 4-wave study of 522 OIF deployed National Guard soldiers.
- Data collection: Survey using self report symptom and relationship measures and post-deployment clinical interviews with a subset of 348 veterans.

▣ Status:

- Longitudinal data collection is underway
- Clinical interview data collection is complete

In-Theater Screening and Follow-up Study

▣ Aims:

- Determine the scope of mTBI/PTSD comorbidity and examine impact on psychosocial functioning across domains.
- *Examine the effect of growth in PTSD symptoms and couple functioning on OIF veterans' parenting practices*

▣ Method:

- Design: Two-wave, quantitative study of 2,677 OIF deployed National Guard soldiers assessed in-theater and followed up one year post-deployment (n = 516 parents)
- Data collection: Self report symptom, relationship functioning, and parenting measures.

▣ Status:

- Data collection is complete

Couples and PTSD Study

▣ Aims:

- *Examine the effect of couple interactions and functioning on course of PTSD symptoms.*
- *Examine the effect of PTSD symptoms on couple functioning over time.*

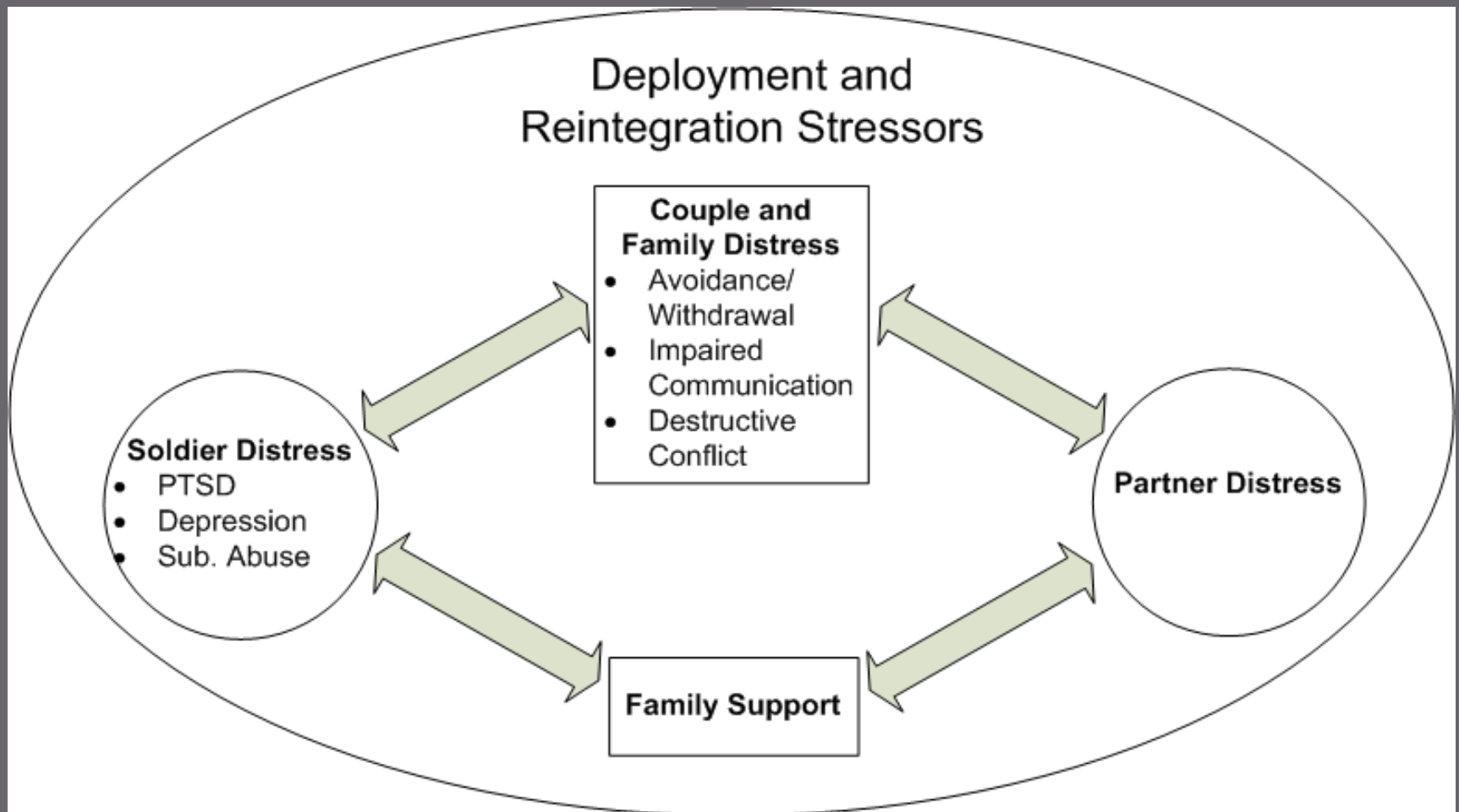
▣ Method:

- Design: Two-wave, mixed method study of 49 OIF National Guard veterans and their spouses.
- Data collection: Self report symptom and relationship measures, clinical interviews, and videotaped observation of couple interactions.

▣ Status:

- Data collection is complete
- Coding of behavioral observation tasks is underway

Conceptual Model: Soldier Resilience and Family Functioning



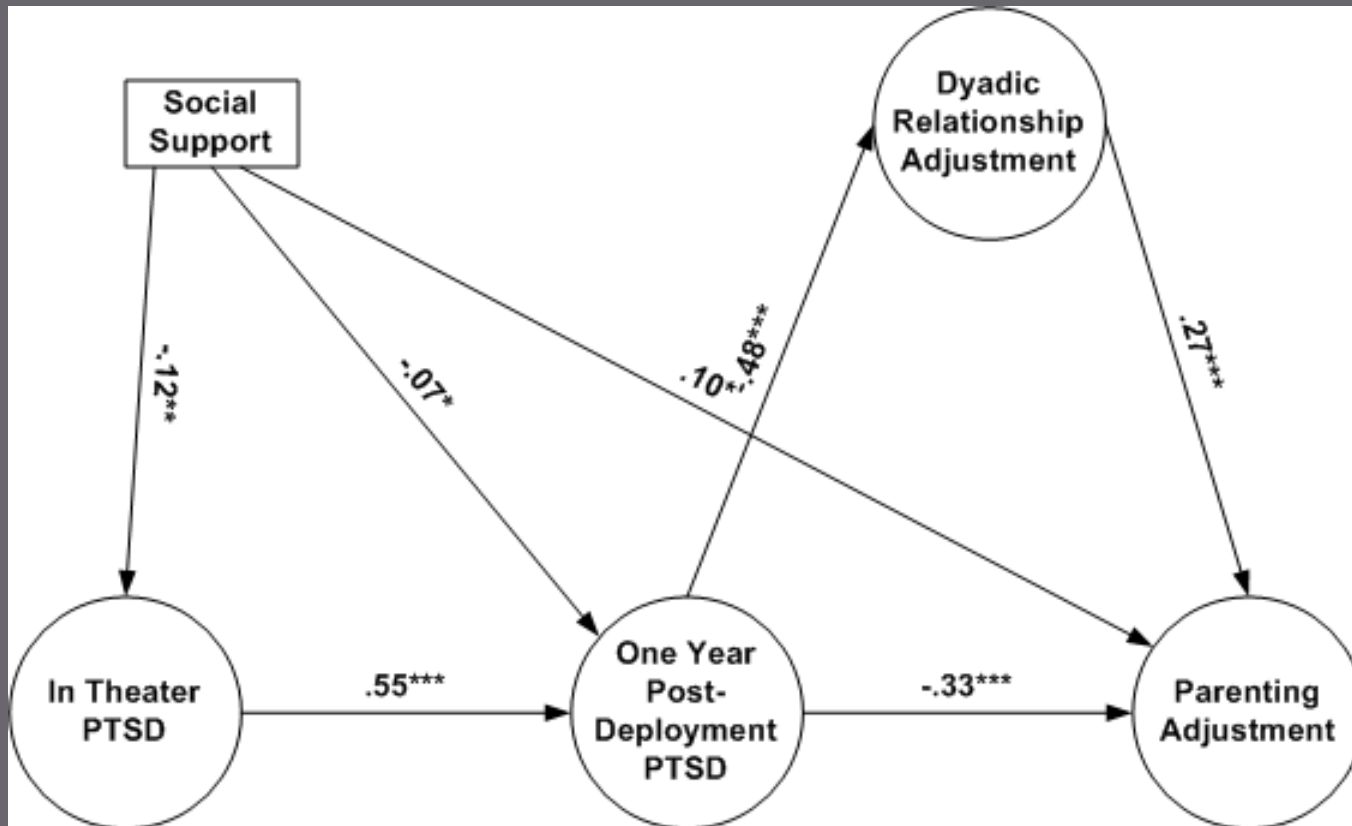
Family relationships and PTSD: RINGS Cohort Study

- ▣ At 3-6 months post-deployment, 16% of our sample of 424 returnees screened positive for PTSD, and 22% of those with partners screened positive for relationship distress
- ▣ PTSD and relationship distress were positively correlated ($r = .32$; Meis et al., in revision)
- ▣ The “numbing” cluster of symptoms was most strongly related to relationship distress (Erbes et al., in revision)

Family relationships and soldier resilience: RINGS Cohort Study

- ▣ Regression analyses found that pre-deployment concern of family and life disruption was predictive of PTSD symptoms post-deployment.
- ▣ Other predictors:
 - Gender, race, rank
 - Pre-deployment personality and trauma history
 - Combat exposure
 - Post-deployment social support and stressors.
- ▣ Implication: Families can serve as a source of support, or a source of strain, for soldiers in the face of combat deployment

PTSD, couple functioning, and parenting: In-Theater Screening and Follow-up Study



Adapted from Gewirtz, Polusny, DeGarmo, Khaylis & Erbes, in Submission

Review of findings: PTSD, couple functioning, and parenting

- ▣ Parenting adjustment included positive parenting, positive child relationships, consistent discipline, and effective supervision
- ▣ Growth in PTSD at one year predicts both dyadic functioning and parenting
- ▣ Dyadic functioning, in turn, also impacts parenting
- ▣ Social support in-theater plays a small but significant protective factor for PTSD and parenting

From the partners: Couples and PTSD Study

- ▣ 7 of 49 soldiers (14%) were diagnosed with PTSD.
- ▣ Partners of soldiers with PTSD reported less marital satisfaction than partners of soldiers without PTSD ($p < .10$).
- ▣ PTSD Numbing symptoms were related to:
 - Soldier reports of:
 - ▣ lower levels of intimacy (sexual, recreational, and positive interactions)
 - ▣ lower couple satisfaction
 - ▣ more coercive and destructive communication
 - ▣ less mutual communication.
 - Partner reports of:
 - ▣ Lower levels of intimacy (emotional, social, and recreational)
 - ▣ Less mutual communication

In their own words: Themes from partner interviews in the RINGS Couples and PTSD Study

Summary & Implications

- ▣ Families play a key role in supporting soldiers as they deal with the stressors of deployment
- ▣ Family members are themselves affected by deployment stressors and soldier's mental health upon their return
- ▣ Rates of relationship distress are elevated in National Guard soldiers following deployment
- ▣ PTSD is associated with greater relationships distress and parenting difficulties.
- ▣ Identifying ways to support and bolster partner and family functioning throughout a deployment cycle should be a key priority for enhancing soldier resilience

Future Directions

- ▣ Proposal submitted to DOD to study effects of multiple deployments on families, family support, and National Guard soldiers over a deployment cycle
- ▣ Early pilot study of applying couple therapy (Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy or IBCT) to treat PTSD within a marital context
- ▣ Proposal being prepared a NIDA submission to study parenting support and training for National Guard soldiers and their partners in the context of combat deployments.

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